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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the author's experiences while supervising refugee counselors and providing social welfare services to refugees in Hong Kong. The background of the worldwide refugee problem and the particular situation of Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong are described in detail. The role of the refugee counselor in preserving the health and dignity of the refugees is discussed, and problems characteristic of high density living are described. The paper concludes with a progress report on the counseling services which lists the problems that had to be overcome in Hong Kong and explains how a program was designed to meet these problems. The action taken and improvements achieved by the program are described along with information about training refugee counselors and other personnel. (JAC)

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REFUGEE COUNSELING AND WELFARE SERVICES: HONG KONG EXPERIENCES

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REFUGEE COUNSELLING AND WELFARE SERVICES - HONG KONG EXPERIENCES

By Timothy Shao, Senior Social Worker, Victoria Park Division, Department for Community Welfare. (Formally Social Services/Counselling Officer, Hong Kong Branch Office, United Nations High Commission for Refugees.)

March 10, 1981 at University House, University of Western Australia, addressing the members of the Migrant Settlement Council for Western Australia.

INTRODUCTION:

In December 1979 I received a phone call from the U.N. representative in Sydney about a job offer in Hong Kong. Basically it was a one year assignment on social welfare and counselling work for Vietnamese refugees. At that time I had had very little idea about how this job would affect my life and my future professional direction. All I knew was that I would be working for Vietnamese Refugees, more commonly referred to as "Boat People".

Not long after my family migrated to Australia from the U.S.A. in 1975, we noticed from the mass media reports, that boat people were arriving in Darwin and the nearby coastal towns. I had been wondering then about several things, just like everybody else had at that time:

Who are these people?

Why they risk their lives to escape?

Are they for real? (maybe there is something fishy going on behind all this)

What are we going to do about them?

The sentiment then was that of puzzlement, confusion and more puzzlement. The community have only a very vague idea about Vietnamese refugees in the back of their minds.

Up to now most of the people still do not know what does "refugee" really mean. People simply carry on their living and from time to time when another boat load of refugees arrive, they ask the same questions again.

The dramatic influx of refugees in Hong Kong has created such an impact that we know that Hong Kong has been treating refugees humanely, that on top of the overcrowding and illegal immigrant problems, these refugees will make it rather difficult for Hong Kong to solve this troublesome problem. Most of all, as a Social Worker I wondered then about how can the welfare and counselling needs of the refugees be fulfilled when their lives are at stake; the sheer numbers completely overwhelme you, and the shortage of workers familiar with refugee problems is so acute and serious.

I was interviewed in Sydney before Christmas 1979 and in early February I arrived in Hong Kong with my family to report for duty to UNHCR. The speed of my recruitment and travel arrangements was considered very fast by U.N. standards and this reflected the urgency of this particular job.

BACKGROUND OF REFUGEE PROBLEM TODAY:

In a series of feature articles which appeared in the South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, with the title of "Refugee Crisis" the present refugee problems were described with the following highlights :

1. Worldwide today there are 16 million refugees and displaced persons.
2. There are more than 2,000 asylum seekers per day.
3. The focus of refugee problem has turned to the Third World.
4. More than half the world's refugees are fleeing from Communism.
5. Refugees today are more aware of their status and the availability of international aids.
6. During the last three years UNHCR has doubled its budget to more than 500 millions in 1980.
7. The refugee problem seems a semi-permanent one and the emergency period is getting longer and a solution harder to find.

JOB DESCRIPTION OF SOCIAL SERVICES/COUNSELLING OFFICER:

Briefly the job was to supervise the counsellors operating in the refugee camps, review the difficult to resettle cases, improve the treatment and rehabilitation of health services, identify the 'vulnerable' groups (unaccompanied minors, handicapped) and plan for their solutions, formulate projects required to meet the needs of refugees in camps, provide social welfare services within the

available resources, ensure that programmes providing language training, education, vocational training and orientation, available to refugees in camps, are effectively used by these refugees.

SITUATION OF VIETNAMESE REFUGEES ON 5.2.1980 IN HONG KONG:

Total refugees then was 50,249.

Among these 43,511 were in UNHCR Open Camps. Sham Shui Po 8,296, Jubilee 6,662, Kai Tak East 8,400, Kai Tak North 13,396, and Argyle Street 4 6,757. Sham Shui Po is managed by Hong Kong Christian Service, Jubilee by International Rescue Committee, Kai Tak East by Caritas, Kai Tak North by Hong Kong Red Cross and Argyle Street 4, by Y.M.C.A.

At that time 207 were in Government Dockyard (new Arrivals), 2,195 were in Chi Ma Wan Detention Centre (all confirmed China cases), and the rest scattered in Ma Tau Wai, Argyle Street 3 and Cape Collinson camps, all departure camps managed by Hong Kong Government.

THE ROLE OF REFUGEE COUNSELLORS:

Upon admission in a country of asylum refugees need to be treated humanely and be helped to preserve their health and dignity. Refugee counsellors should attempt to bear in mind the following area of work.

1. Provide the supportive services required by refugees to cope with their new situation.

2. Communicate the refugee needs to those who can provide the means for meeting them and to the community at large.

3. Communicate to the refugees the realities which they must face in the country of their asylum or where they plan to go next.

4. In the process, skilled and sensitive counsellors will ensure that the refugees do not lose more of their sense of security while being exposed to the difficulties which are present or in store for the future.

5. Refugees need to be recognised as individuals and not to be considered as numbers.

6. Refugees need to be reassured that the people they are dealing with do not consider them as having lost their capacity to judge, plan, and in general, organise their own life and that of their community.

7. Counselling to diminish SHOCK of arrival in a camp.

8. Advise them of their rights and responsibilities.

9. Enable them to participate in the organisation of their life and their community.

10. Attend to the special needs of the most vulnerable members (handicapped, unaccompanied minors, elderly, physically ill.)

11. Discuss with them realistic possibilities for the future.

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH DENSITY LIVING:

1. Lacking privacy.
2. Overcrowding.
3. High level of noise.
4. Congestion in traffic and bad driving conditions.
5. Children lacking space to play.
6. Astronomical rent.
7. Throwing heavy and bulky objects from high rise buildings causing casualties.
8. High suicide rate. Expatriates in particular.
9. Cinema, restaurant, supermarket, and department stores are always full.
10. Lacking sense of belonging. (Perhaps Hong Kong's unique situation is particularly affecting the local community's attitude.)

PROGRESS REPORT OF COUNSELLING SECTION:

Immediately after my arrival I inspected all camps and made a quick assessment of the situation and discovered several serious problems.

1. There was virtually no counselling or welfare services available due to staff shortage. This was the result of several factors :

   (a) Hong Kong has a severe shortage of Social Workers. Hong Kong Council of Social Service reported in June 1980 that there were 260 qualified Social Worker vacancies and 190 Welfare Worker vacancies.

   (b) Refugee work is of a temporary nature offering no job security at all. Hong Kong is a very practical society where employment is easy to obtain, but temporary job vacancies are difficult to fill.

   (c) Language requirement for counsellors is Vietnamese or Cantonese. There is an acute shortage of trained manpower available.

2. Environment of counselling work extremely poor. The space and set-up where counsellors work is crowded, noisy and messy - to say the least. It lacks privacy, and clerical support has never been sufficient.

3. Working relationships with Voluntary Agencies are rather touchy. One important aspect of refugee work is that there are always plenty of agencies involved, especially in the country of asylum. This usually requires skillful co-ordination and full co-operation among all agencies, otherwise the waste of duplication

and overlapping of services, can be great and the tragedy of delay in resettlement resulting from the gaps of services, can be heartbreaking.

4. The function of counselling and welfare services was still new and the support from my colleagues was minimal. In the early days of my work very few people in Hong Kong understood the meaning of counselling. This is due to the strong traditional role of UNHCR in the area of refugee protection, fund raising, and resettlement. Counselling needs have only emerged during the recent refugee influx and confirmed in the Geneva Conference in 1979.

5. Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong suffered from unique problems in terms of counselling for their resettlement. Factors such as cultural affinity, open camps arrangement, employment opportunities, and highly advanced society and living standards, are affecting refugees in their future planning.

Following is an outline of action taken, and improvements achieved towards a solution, during the one year period.

1. Staff and Programme Development:

My first priority was to recruit more counsellors, train them and assign them to work as soon as possible. This would ease the work load and provide some basic services desperately needed by the refugees.

The staffing level on arrival was six counsellors for 43,511 refugees. Three interpreters and ten camp aids. (Selected refuges to assist in keeping the camp offices running.)

To overcome the problems mentioned above, I recruited people with a welfare background, or associated degrees such as Sociology, Psychology, or Divinity. In-service training was strengthened. Every two to three weeks counsellors were gathered for training in counselling techniques, resettlement orientation and case discussion. I had successfully recruited seven counsellors and one United Nations Volunteer. The number of camp aids was also increased from ten to fifteen.

(a) Handicapped Refugees Programme:
In July 1979 we had identified 655 cases with various handicaps involving 1,420 persons who might develop into a "residual" or "hardcore" cases with special resettlement problems. These included refugees with physical disability or illness, mentally disturbed or retarded, unaccompanied minors, single young men (they are extremely hard to resettle), polygamists and persons with a known criminal record.

(b) Financial Assistance to Handicapped Refugees:
Refugees with needs such as wheelchairs, prosthesis and medical equipments are being assisted by UNHCR. I also received a private donation from Japan for Hong Kong and Macau caseload.

(c) Orientation Activities:
By co-ordinating closely with the schedule of visiting selection teams and the refugee departures to countries of resettlement, various types of orientation programmes including pre-departure orientation, and country orientation, were conducted in all camps. With the use of films, slides posters, in group sessions and speakers familiar with the country of resettlement, we have achieved the basic objective of informing the refugees about the condition and situation in their new countries.

(d) Macau Family Reunion:
By the end of 1980 we had successfully reunited 64 persons between Hong Kong and Macau. This would assure the refugees that during their waiting period they can meet and reunite with their family members. Most of all this would better their chances of resettlement as a complete family unit and ensure a better family atmosphere while awaiting resettlement.

(e) I/ESL and R/ESL Programmes:
Currently we have employed 60 ESL teachers and 15 Cultural Orientation Teachers for I/ESL. This Programme is being operated for US-bound refugees only. I/ESL was operational as of December 1980 with first phase enrollment of 600 students. By January 1981 another 600 students enrolled and by February, yet another 600 joined the classes. The course has a duration of three months. Every day during the week they have three hours of English instruction and 1½ hours of Cultural Orientation teaching in their own language. This programme is being conducted in Argyle Street 4 Camp.

Regular ESL has been operating from the very beginning of the camp existence. However, the teaching materials and methods in the beginning were rather confused and lacked co-ordination. The situation was much better after the implementation of I/ESL.

2. Counselling space was rearranged and movable partitions were installed to ensure the provision of privacy, although in a limited way, for the refugees. More camp aids were recruited to ease the problem of clerical support. Here we have discovered the problem of cultural differences. Vietnamese refugees in camps tend to gather around the office seeking information about

their resettlement very frequently. The concept of office appointment is new to them. After they overcame the initial inhibition to meet the UN counsellors they tend to deal with problems on an ad hoc basis. The popular attitude is that "I will approach the counsellor when I have the problem". The idea of forward planning is rather hard to sell. This problem will affect the work of migrant workers in the country of resettlement as it is already happening here. (In the area of cultural orientation this is particularly serious.)

3. By consistently proving to the Voluntary Agencies that counsellors are helping refugees to solve their resettlement related problems, not to replace them or drive them out of the camps and out of business, we have convinced them finally that counselling and welfare services for refugees is vital and important. Better co-ordination and co-operation among Government and Voluntary Agencies will be needed in the country of resettlement as the task then is to facilitate the process of integration which will require the full participation of the community at large.

4. My colleagues acknowledged at the last staff meeting that they were convinced that counselling and welfare services for refugees is essential and important as the Voluntary Agencies and Hong Kong Government have both indicated. This was no easy task considering the problems that I have encountered.

5. A high percentage of refugees are of ethnic Chinese background. They are comfortable in a Chinese society and their ability to communicate orally in Cantonese and to read and write in Chinese certainly make their lives easy. This has considerably mitigated the cultural shock and softened the blow of being in a strange environment after suffering their traumatic experiences during their escape from their homeland.

   No restriction is placed on refugees for going out or coming back to their camps. The security guard is to keep the undesirables out of the camps.

   Due to the fact that refugees can work to support him/herself and their families we noticed that there were both positive and negative effects in their resettlement, counselling, education, and integration preparation.

   Positive Aspect

   (a) Restoration of confidence and dignity. Refugee found something to do which proved to the world that they are worthy of respect because they can support themselves.

(b) Time well occupied. The idleness situation is avoided. Problems such as drinking, gambling and group fights due to boredom suffered by Macau camps are rather rare in Hong Kong.

(c) Learning experience in adjusting to new environments such as working environment, employer-employee relationship, getting along with co-workers and other community members.

(d) Accumulation of personal wealth or saving. For refugees nothing is more practical and reliable than a few dollars in their pockets.

Negative Aspect

(a) Sometimes money seems to be overvalued in comparison with resettlement, education, and orientation opportunities. This has created some problems for counsellors and camp workers.

(b) Paying jobs sometimes created an illusion that perhaps staying in Hong Kong is better than moving on to a third country. This especially makes it hard for the resettlement operation to run smoothly.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF REFUGEE COUNSELLING:

1. People in transit.
2. People with traumatic experience.
3. Uncertain and insecure about future.
4. Prolong waiting in the refugee camps.
5. Separation from family and homeland.
6. Lacking trust in the authority and Government.

In general, "Camp Syndrome" resulting in the expressed symptoms such as anxiety, restlessness, despair, insecurity, aggressior, and even open hostility, were readily detectable in the refugee camps.

Problems suffered by refugee counsellors:

1. Language barrier (often necessary to rely on interpreter).
2. No privacy and noisy environment in their work.
3. Effectiveness of counselling questioned (can I really help them?)
4. Will refugees accept my role as counsellor?
5. Inadequate training.
6. Inadequate information on resettlement.

TRAINING OF COUNSELLORS AND OTHER INTEGRATION PERSONNEL:

Following areas of training are considered vital to the counsellors:

1. Cultural differences.
2. Reception, resettlement procedures.
3. Information about refugee needs.
4. Understanding of the refugee experience.
5. Record keeping.
6. Policies and programmes.
7. Dynamics of the helping process.
8. Geography and history of refugee's home country.
9. Resettlement goals.
10. Skill in communicating.

MACAU PROGRAMME:

Although Macau is under the Hong Kong Branch Office's supervision, I found myself unable to attend to the needs of Macau refugees initially. All three camps are run bythe Catholic Relief Society. In February 1980 there were about 5,000 refugees in Macau. Resettlement was extremely slow and the camp morale was low.

My involvement with Macau started in August 1980 when I felt that Hong Kong caseload was under control, and also I had drawn some practical experience from the Hong Kong cases.

I was on mission to Macau four times and conducted two in-service training programmes for social workers there. I was also invited to lecture in the Training Institute for Social Workers in Macau about refugee counselling and social casework.

My staff members provided several interviews, registration and orientation campaigns to assist the Macau workers in catching up with their backlog. As Portuguese authorities had a different way of handling business, I found that certain adjustments were necessary.

On my last mission to Macau the number of refugees were about 2,000 and the speed of resettlement had progressed to a satisfactory level.

HONG KONG CASELOAD UPDATE:

By the end of January 1981 before my departure from Hong Kong the number of refugees totalled 22,991. Among these 19,634 were in UNHCR Open Camps. Jubilee was closed by the end of December 1980. Argyle 4 was converted to a I/ESL Departure Camp. Sham Shui Po is scheduled to be closed down by the end of March 1981.

It is safe to say that the situation in Hong Kong is under control and provided that there are no influx of refugees, Hong Kong can expect to clear its backlog of refugees by the end of 1981.

INTEGRATION WORKSHOP IN GENEVA:

Representatives from Governments and Voluntary Agencies involved in refugee resettlement work, met in Geneva last September to discuss the problem of refugee integration and settlement. The workshop produced comprehensive recommendations on the following areas :

1. Arrangements prior to the departure of refugees for the country of resettlement.

2. Initial arrangements in country of resettlement.

3. Economic, social, and legal aspects of integration.

4. Attention to refugees with special needs (women refugee for example).

5. Public information.

6. Training of counsellors and other integration personnel.

I assigned my staff members in Hong Kong prior to my departure to study and implement several pertinent recommendations affecting the refugees in Hong Kong Camps.

On 2-4 February, 1981 I attended a meeting called by Austcare and UNHCR, during which consideration was given to the possibility of calling a national conference or workshop to examine the feasibility of implementing the relevant recommendations resulting from the Geneva Workshop. The response was most favourable. Austcare Education Officer Miss Helen King will look into this matter; i.e. National Conference possibly to be held in July. However, the meeting suggested that now that we have acquired some practical experiences, every State should call a State-wide seminar to discuss their relevant experiences and prepare for the National Conference.

I therefore would suggest that the Migrant Settlement Council for Western Australia should sponsor a seminar on refugee settlement and integration for migrant workers, both Government and voluntary sectors, using Geneva Workshop materials and local experiences, for discussion. I will volunteer for the contribution of information and experiences as a refugee worker to this proposed seminar which I hope can take place as soon as possible.

CONCLUSION:

A year ago I went to Hong Kong knowing very little about refugees and wondered what can I do to help them. Now I realize that refugees are people just like you and me. The only difference is that they have suffered tragic consequences through leaving their homeland involuntarily. Fortunately many made it to the countries of asylum or resettlement. Many more - how many we don't know - were unfortunately drowned or killed in the course of escape.

Most of them suffered and still are suffering from the pain of separation, adjusting to the new environment and accepting reality. Only with empathy and skillful counselling techniques can one hope to achieve the purpose of assisting them in the difficult process of integration.

The most effective way to help them is through intensified public education campaigns emphasizing basic human rights, efforts to understand their cultural background and problems of adjustment, and to accept them as members of this society. Resources to assist the refugee settlement, be it information or talents in skill or language, should be pooled and publicized. Agencies working towards the goal of helping migrants and refugees in settlement should get together to exchange information, co-ordinating their efforts in certain difficult areas, supporting each other in overcoming the initial stage problems; i.e. raising public awareness about refugees and the problem of settlement, which is always a colossal task. Finally, migrant workers need to be recognized and their experiences shared through constant injection of staff development activities such as the State-wide seminar that I proposed.

Thank you very much for the opportunity of allowing me to share my experience in Hong Kong and Macau with you. I wish you every success in your important job in the settlement of migrants into Western Australia.